

Stress in Adults after a Disaster: Warning Signs and Management

*Extension Family and Consumer Science Specialists
The Texas A&M University System*

A disaster can be stressful for many people and can lead to mental and emotional disruption. This is commonly referred to as post-disaster stress.

An adult's emotional reactions after a trauma can vary greatly, ranging from very little distress to extreme stress reactions. Although a person's reaction to post-disaster stress may be troubling, remember that these are normal reactions to abnormal situations.

Symptoms of Stress

Following are potential symptoms you might encounter in your interactions with adults after a disaster or terrorism event:

Erratic behavior — Some people engage in risky behaviors or even criminal activity to try to solve financial problems or deal with other matters. Anger is common.

Changes in mood — After a disaster, many people feel nervous, anxious and depressed. They also can experience other emotions, including irritability and rapid mood swings. This behavior often results in outbursts toward family, friends and co-workers. Guilt feelings also are possible, especially if a person lost a loved one in the disaster. Some people may wish they had taken the place of their loved one or been there with that person during the crisis.

Increased substance abuse — In stressful situations, some adults abuse alcohol or other substances. Such behavior may lead to further problems at home and at work.

Physical symptoms — Adults who report physical symptoms such as headaches, fatigue and pain may request more sick leave from work. Some of these symptoms may be related to increased anxiety. High levels of stress can weaken the immune system, leading to increases in illness.

Recurrent thoughts — Adults may think about the disaster constantly and find it difficult to think about anything else. Dreams and daydreams about the event are also common. Some people may have flashbacks of the event or feel that they are reliving it. Recurrent thoughts or flashbacks can interfere with concentration and work performance.

Avoidance — Adults may want to avoid places or things that remind them of the event. Such reminders bring back the strong emotions they experienced during the disaster. Depending on the nature of the disaster, victims have commonly avoided airplanes, bodies of water, cars and tall buildings.

Shaken belief systems — After a disaster, adults may question their religious or spiritual beliefs. They also may question their assumptions about the safety of their community or country as a result of a toxic waste disaster, for example. Others may question their trust in government officials, especially if there is some concern that early information may have been intentionally withheld from the public. Such questioning and soul-searching is common after a disaster as people search for meaning and resolution.

Strained relationships — Adults may withdraw from their families or friends when they feel distressed. Many victims describe their self-isolation as a product of feeling helpless and without energy. Others indicate that they simply want to avoid troubling others with the burden of their distress. Some victims avoid leaving home for fear that something terrible will happen again, or they may feel shame over their emotional reactions. There also are those who may not want to leave their family members alone so they can protect them from another possible disaster. Stress on a marriage is another warning sign, and it may increase because of disaster-related stressors.

Cognitive problems — People may have difficulty concentrating, paying attention and remembering things. Concentration and focus may be impaired by fatigue, recurrent thoughts of the disaster and worry about the future.

Impaired work performance — It is common for work performance and productivity to drop after a disaster. Occupational achievement may seem less important after a tragedy. Relationships and work performance may suffer because of impaired concentration, memory and attention, along with increased irritability and mood swings.

Changes in sleeping, eating, and daily routines — People commonly have trouble sleeping, and adults might have nightmares about the disaster. They might also experience daydreams that make them feel they are reliving the event. Dramatic changes in appetite — especially, a drop in appetite — are common.

Managing Stress

Practicing good stress management after a disaster can lessen your feelings of distress. Below are actions that can help you relieve stress:

Take care of yourself — This approach will help you cope with the stressors after a disaster. Eat healthful foods, get plenty of rest, take some time to relax each day and know your personal limits. You also may find it helpful to learn relaxation techniques, meditation or yoga. Many people want to help their families and friends after a disaster. However, you will be less helpful to others if you are tired and stressed.

Seek support — Reaching out to people allows you to talk with others about the experience. Seek out individuals you trust, and spend time with family and friends. When seeking support, remember that those people with whom you're close also may be distressed about the disaster. Because of this, some of them may be unable to provide the help you need. If this is the case, seek out other sources of support.

Maintain routines — If possible, stick with your normal routine. This can help provide a sense of normalcy as well as help you maintain your usual social contacts at school, work or other places you usually go every day. Following your regular routine can also help you take your mind off the disaster — even if just for a little while. If you cannot attend your regular activities because of the disaster, try to maintain as many of your home routines as possible (e.g., meals and family time) and work on hobbies or other activities that you enjoy.

Engage in physical activity — Physical activity can be an excellent stress reliever for many people. Walking, jogging or playing basketball can help. Some people may prefer cleaning the garage or working in the yard. This will not only help manage stress, but also ease pressure from the problems that the disaster created.

Limit exposure to news coverage of the event — After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, some people found that watching too much media coverage of an event increased their feelings of distress. It is normal to want to stay updated on the events surrounding a disaster. However, you may be able to lessen your feelings of distress by limiting the amount of time you spend watching or listening to media coverage of an event.

Seek trusted sources of information — During any disaster, seek accurate sources of information. This is especially true for events involving chemicals or biological agents. Information may come from the Centers for Disease Control, from your local government officials or from your family doctor. For the most accurate information, search sites maintained by local, state or federal governmental agencies. Educating yourself may make you feel like you have some control over the situation. However, as is the case with media exposure, it can be stressful if you spend too much time seeking information.

Avoid using drugs and alcohol — Avoid using drugs or alcohol to cope with stress. Such substances only provide a temporary “numbing” of feelings from distress and can lead to additional problems. Using them as a coping mechanism can cause difficulties, for example, in family relationships, job performance and recovery from the disaster.

Consider participating in recovery efforts — Helping others can be a great source of stress relief for some people. You can help by volunteering in recovery efforts, such as cleaning up debris, delivering food to families or raising disaster recovery funds. You may want to provide support by listening to other people’s disaster experiences. However, to avoid feeling “burned out” from being too involved, you must recognize your own limits. Seek adequate time and support for yourself if you wish to help others. If you find that participating in recovery efforts increases your stress, do not be afraid to decrease your activity level.

Be understanding of yourself and others — Remember that it is normal for people to be more distressed in the initial period after a disaster. You may need to be more patient than usual with co-

workers, family members or children. Give them opportunities to talk about their experiences and encourage them to take extra time for themselves. You also need to understand that it may take you longer than others to recover from the disaster. If you feel strained, try to avoid taking on extra responsibilities. Disaster recovery is an individual process.

Seek extra help — You may benefit from getting additional help if you still feel upset for more than a month after a disaster. This is particularly important if stress seems to interfere with your daily activities, such as work, school or family responsibilities. Help is available from many sources: your pastor or a clergy member, a mental health professional, a community mental health center or your doctor. All of these people can refer you to an appropriate source of help. In addition to family and friends, other sources of help might include support groups at work or in the community. Because most disasters are big events that significantly impact many people, coming together is an important part of rebuilding a community. Remember, you need to help and support yourself to be able to help and support others around you.

Materials in this publication were adapted for use in Texas by Janie Harris, Housing and Environment Specialist, Texas Cooperative Extension from *Triumph Over Tragedy. A Community Response to Managing Trauma in Times of Disaster and Terrorism*, Second Edition, 2004, and from The National Rural Behavioral Health Center (NRBHC). Participating agencies: Department of Clinical & Health Psychology, Department of Family, Youth & Community Sciences, College of Public Health & Health Professions, University of Florida Cooperative Extension—IFAS and Suwanee River Area Health Education Center

Produced by AgriLife Communications and Marketing, The Texas A&M System
Extension publications can be found on the Web at: <http://AgriLifebookstore.org>

Visit the Texas AgriLife Extension Service at <http://AgriLifeextension.tamu.edu>

Educational programs of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service are open to all people without regard to race, color, sex, disability, religion, age, or national origin.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, Acts of Congress of May 8, 1914, as amended, and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Edward G. Smith, Director, Texas AgriLife Extension Service, The Texas A&M System.